

American Literature

Description of the Examination

The Subject Examination in American Literature covers the material usually taught in a two-semester survey course (or the equivalent) at the college level. It deals with prose and poetry written in the United States from colonial times to the present. It is primarily a test of knowledge about literary works -- their content, backgrounds, and authors -- but also requires familiarity with the terminology used by literary critics and historians. The exam emphasizes fiction and poetry, and deals to a lesser degree with the essay, drama, and autobiography.

In both coverage and approach, the exam resembles the chronologically organized survey of American literature offered by many colleges. It assumes that the candidate has read widely and developed an appreciation of American literature, knows the basic literary periods, and has a sense of the historical development of American literature.

The test contains approximately 100 multiple-choice questions to be answered in two separately timed 45-minute sections.

There is also an optional essay section that can be taken in addition to the multiple-choice test. Contact the school where you would like to receive credit for your CLEP exam to see if it requires the optional essay section for this exam. The essay section is graded by the institution that requests it.

Knowledge and Skills Required

Questions on the test require candidates to demonstrate one or more of the following abilities.

- Knowledge of the content of particular literary works -- their characters, plots, settings, themes, etc. (about 50-60 percent of the exam)
- Ability to understand and interpret short poems or excerpts from long poems and prose works presented in the test book (about 25-35 percent of the exam)
- Knowledge of the historical and social settings of specific works, their authors, and their relations to other literary works and to literary traditions (about 10 percent of the exam)
- Understanding of the critical theories of American writers, and of critical terms, verse forms, and literary devices (about 5 percent of the exam)

The American Literature exam requires a knowledge and understanding of the works and writers of the following periods.

Approximate Percent of Examination

10-15%	Colonial and Early National (1620-1830)
25%	Romantic (1830-1870)
25%	Realistic and Early Naturalistic (1870-1910)
25%	Modern (1910-1945)

Study Resources

To prepare for the American Literature exam, you should read critically the contents of at least one anthology, which you can find in most college bookstores. Most textbook anthologies contain a representative sample of readings as well as discussions of historical background, literary styles and devices characteristic of various authors and periods, and other material relevant to the test. The anthologies do vary somewhat in their content, approach, and emphasis; you are advised to consult more than one or to consult some specialized books on major authors, periods, and literary forms and terminology. You should also read some of the major novels that are mentioned or excerpted in the anthologies, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Other novelists whose major works you should be familiar with include Melville, Crane, Wharton, Cather, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Ellison, and Wright. You can probably obtain an extensive reading list of American literature from a college English department, library, or bookstore.